



Hon. Pedro R. Pierluisi
Statement and Questions as Prepared for Delivery
Oversight Hearing on the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement
ICE Director Sarah Saldaña
House Committee on the Judiciary
April 14, 2014

Good morning, Director Saldaña. Welcome to the Committee.

Understandably, a lot of the questions so far in this hearing have involved ICE's mission to enforce our nation's immigration laws. I want to discuss ICE's equally important mission to disrupt and dismantle drug trafficking organizations. As part of this mission, I know that ICE works in partnership with other DHS component agencies like CBP and the Coast Guard, DOJ component agencies like the FBI and DEA, and state and local law enforcement. You are an important player in a whole-of-government effort to combat drug trafficking and the violence associated with it.

In January 2012, I met with your predecessor, John Morton. Puerto Rico had just experienced the most violent year in the U.S. territory's history. In 2011, there were 1,136 homicides in Puerto Rico. That is the equivalent of over three murder a day, every day. It was roughly the same number of annual homicides as Texas, which has a population seven times greater than Puerto Rico's.

As my colleagues can attest, having heard me question senior official after senior official who have appeared as witnesses before this Committee, I have been on a campaign since 2009 to persuade federal law enforcement agencies to increase the level of attention and resources that they dedicate to Puerto Rico, so that these resources are commensurate with the threat. The reality is that the level of attention and resources from the federal government was—and I emphasize the word “was”—clearly deficient. And, too often, my constituents were paying the price with their lives.

Starting in late 2012, however, the tide began to turn. Under the leadership of Secretary Napolitano, DHS component agencies began to substantially increase the resources they assign to Puerto Rico.

For example, the Coast Guard has dramatically increased the number of hours its planes and cutters spend conducting counter-drug operations around Puerto Rico, and will completely replace its current fleet of cutters with faster, more modern vessels by mid-2016.

Moreover, in 2013, your agency—ICE—sent 30 additional agents to Puerto Rico, where they arrested about 900 violent criminals and seized a great deal of illegal narcotics and weapons.

In addition, DHS assigned to San Juan a Border Enforcement Security Task Force, a multi-agency team of federal and local officials designed to dismantle criminal organizations.

Furthermore, CBP repaired the counter-drug radar system in southern Puerto Rico, which had been destroyed in 2011. Along with Congressman Michael McCaul of Texas, I led the successful effort in Congress to save the aerostat program from elimination and to transfer the program from DOD to DHS.

Moreover, TSA has enhanced searches of luggage, parcels and cargo transported on flights between Puerto Rico and the U.S. mainland for illegal narcotics and weapons.

Finally, this year, the Office of National Drug Control Policy within the White House published the first-ever Caribbean Border Counternarcotics Strategy, as required by Congress.

Collectively, these efforts have produced remarkable results. In 2014, there were 681 homicides in Puerto Rico. That is 40 percent lower than in 2011, 30 percent lower than in 2012, and nearly 25 percent lower than in 2013. You and your colleagues at DHS should feel very proud of this accomplishment, because you played a major role.

Nevertheless, as I am sure you would be the first to say, we cannot relent. Rather, we must sustain and build upon this hard-earned success. Puerto Rico still has a murder rate that is far higher than any U.S. state or the District of Columbia, with an average of roughly two homicides each day.

So, I would like to give you an opportunity to tell the Committee what ICE is currently doing to fight drug trafficking and related violence in Puerto Rico—our nation’s Caribbean border—and what plans ICE has for the future.